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The Assumptions and Implications of Federal Adult Education Legislation.

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Two premises of Federal adult basic education legislation are that grade level completed measures achievement level or at least is significantly and positively related thereto, and that similar economic backgrounds indicate similar educational needs. Results of a 1967-68 New Jersey study, which showed relatively little relationship between grades completed and reading and mathematics achievement scores in a low income population, tend to contradict both premises. A more accurate formula is needed for adult education funding at the state and Federal levels, and the scope of dissimilar instructional needs of the target population must be further examined. (One table and four references are included.) (ly)

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The Assumptions and Implications of Federal Adult Education Legislation

C. Havrilesky

I. INTRODUCTION

The Federal Adult Basic Education legislation must be examined for two reasons. First, it is well known that official attitudes tend to influence both scientific and technological research as well as social reform. Second, as a practical matter, apportionment of federal funds is guided by the legislation.

If federal legislation is based on specious premises, research and reform programs could be seriously misguided. For example, Lysenko's genetic theories, enforced as dogma by the Soviet State in the 1930's, retarded biological research in Iron Curtain countries during the entire Stalinist era. As another example, the state-promulgated dogma of laissez-faire impeded scientific investigation into the fundamental causes of the Great Depression. Equity considerations call for a careful inspection of the Adult Education legislation on the same grounds.

In particular, two premises of the Federal Adult Basic Education legislation are questionable. First, the legislation assumes that grade-level completed measures achievement level or at least that there is some significant positive relationship between the two. Second, the legislation postulates that similar income backgrounds indicate similar instructional needs. Section III of this study evaluates these premises by use of simple correlation analysis and test results.

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II. BACKGROUND

Before going further, the legislation itself should be examined. Adult Basic Education received its strongest impetus with the enactment of Title II-B of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.(1.) The premised identification of the poverty (target) groups is by income criteria.

Admission standards to ABE programs funded under Title II-B and subsequent ABE legislation under the War on Poverty (OEO) changed slightly since 1964 but the target group is still principally categorized by income criteria. The present income criterion for non-farm individuals is $3,200 for a family of four. Non-income criteria for eligibility in ABE programs are either an explicit part of the legislation or evolved as a result of educators' interpretations. Some of these non-income criteria are: age; previous formal schooling of prospective participants; literacy achievement levels of prospective participants as measured by either teacher judgment or by standardized tests. Students who do not meet the income criteria are admitted to federally funded ABE programs but Adult Basic Education is implicitly designed for undereducated, un- or underemployed poor people.

The Act reads:

> "It is the purpose of this part to initiate programs of instruction for individuals who have attained age eighteen and whose inability to read and write the English language

constitutes a substantial impairment of their ability to get or retain employment commensurate with their real ability, so as to help eliminate such inability and raise the level of such individuals with a view to making them less likely to become dependent on others, improving their ability to benefit from occupational training and otherwise increasing their opportunities for more productive and profitable employment, and making them better able to meet their adult responsibilities." (1-Section 212)

"Grants under subsection (a) may be used in accordance with regulations of the Director,

"...sums so allocated for a fiscal year shall be allotted by the Director on the basis of the relative number of individuals in each State who have attained age eighteen and who have completed not more than five grades of school or have not achieved an equivalency level of education as determined by the Director on the basis of the best and most recent information available to him, including any relevant data furnished to him by the Department of Commerce." (1-Section 215)

The transfer of Adult Basic Education to the Office of Education by the Adult Education Act of 1966 did not significantly alter the implicit and explicit guidelines of the legislation nor the implementation of the Act. The grade completion criterion has been revised from 5th grade to 8th grade but yet gives priority to serving below fifth grade completed participants.

The reprint on the next page indicates that future legislation will also be based on questionable premises.

Philadelphia Inquirer
(From Wire Service)
Washington, Sept. 16, 1968

ADULT SCHOOL HAILED

President Johnson on Monday called for a step-up in adult education programs to help the Nation's 24 million citizens who do not have the equivalent of an eighth-grade education.

In sending to Congress the first annual report of the National Advisory Committee on Adult Education, the President said, "A national policy on adult basic education is needed."

The report said encouraging advances had been made in the program since it was established through various legislation dating to 1964, but added that "The job is far from finished."

The committee recommended that the program focus on the Nation's education priorities including civic participation, jobs, home and family life. It proposed appropriations over a three-year period, starting in fiscal 1970, of $100 million and going up to $200 million in 1972.

The report also suggested:

- That the Office of Education consider additional fund requests from state educational agencies for urban areas and that $200 million be appropriated immediately for this purpose.

- That the Office of Education develop a 10-year plan for adult education with provisions for coordinating all Federal programs and an outlay of $250,000 for the policy planners.

- An appropriation of $200,000 to support a staff of data gathering services.

- Expansion of training programs for teachers, administrators and counselors with an appropriation of $5 million for 5000 trainees in fiscal 1970.

III. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Data

The population in the study were all target group members as measured by the income criterion. The random sample consisted of 683 participants in education programs funded by the Department of Community Affairs, State of New Jersey during the six month period beginning September, 1967 through February, 1968. There were no subjects in the sample who were outside the income parameters of the universe of the OEO target population.

All subjects took the Gates Reading Survey (2.) and the Los Angeles Diagnostic Math Test (3.). All subjects were interviewed to ascertain age and grade level completed in formal schooling. Subjects who had dropped out of school during February of the 9th grade, for instance, were considered to have completed only 8th grade. The Gates Reading Survey and the Los Angeles Math test were administered to all subjects prior to entrance into the education program.

First Hypothesis

If grade level completed is a reliable criterion for the subjects delineated in the federal legislation, then we should find a high positive correlation between grade completed and reading and math achievement scores. The hypothesis is that there is a high positive correlation between grade completed and reading and math achievement scores. If we do not find this high positive correlation, then grade completed is not a reliable criterion for the subjects delineated in the federal legislation.

TABLE I

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GRADE COMPLETED AND
READING AND MATH ACHIEVEMENT SCORES FOR THE TARGET GROUP

Simple Correlation Coefficients

	AGE	READ.	MATH	G.C.
AGE		-.031	-.074	-.367
READ.			.638	.281
MATH				.198
G.C.				

The low correlations between the reading and math scores and the grade completed indicate relatively little relation between actual grade completed on the one hand and actual measured achievement levels on the other hand. The hypothesis that there is a high positive correlation between grade completed and reading and math achievement scores should be skeptically viewed.

Second Hypothesis

The second hypothesis is that similar income indicates similar instructional need. This hypothesis will be accepted if everyone in the sample conforms to the 0-8 instructional need level of the Federal legislation. It is necessary to evaluate this hypothesis for both the grade level criterion and for the achievement level criterion. Although we have accepted the lack of relationship between grade level and achievement level, it is useful to look at the 0-8 instruction level according to both criteria. (The Federal legislation still allows the Director to use either criteria as noted in Section 215.)

Using the grade-level completed criterion, 81 of the 683 subjects conformed to the 0-8 instructional need level of the Federal legislation. The other 602 subjects completed from between 9 to 11 years of formal schooling and could therefore, using grade-level completed as the criterion, be excluded from programs funded under the legislation.

Using achievement scores as the criterion, 409 of the 683 subjects conform to the 0-8 instructional need level of the Federal legislation. Using either criteria the hypothesis should be viewed skeptically.

IV. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Any formula for the apportionment of funds in Adult Education to the States on the basis of grade level completed as reported either by the U.S. Census or by State education records should be viewed with skepticism.

The assumption of the legislation that the low income population described in Section 212 have similar instructional needs does not appear to be valid.

A more accurate formula is needed for a proportioning Adult Education funds both at the Federal and at the State level and the scope of dissimilar instructional needs of the target population must be further examined. Grade level restrictions should not continue to exclude 40% of the target population from participating in Federally-funded Adult Education programs.

The National Advisory Committee of Adult Education should discontinue the use of grade completed statistics as a measure of the need for Basic Education. The equivalent of an eighth-grade education should not be recognized as an index for formulating legislation guidelines.

December 2, 1968

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C. Havrilesky

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